

Once Upon a Time in American Ornithology

James Little Baillie, whose parents had emigrated from Great Britain to Canada, was born on 4 July 1904 in Toronto, Ontario. The fifth of 11 children, he went to work at the age of 13 after completing elementary school. When he was 16, Baillie began bird watching, and, just two years later in 1922, he was appointed as technical assistant for the ornithology department of the Royal Ontario Museum (ROM) of Zoology. From 1927 to 1931, he attended high school night classes, although he never earned enough credits to graduate. Nonetheless, his enthusiasm and profound knowledge of birds eventually resulted in his promotion to assistant curator of ornithology at ROM, a position in which he served for nearly 50 years.

Recognizing the value of public awareness in conservation endeavors, for 39 years Baillie wrote a weekly column, *Birdland*, for the Toronto Evening Telegram. He liked working with youth and mentored countless beginning ornithologists, including ecologist Robert MacArthur and artist Robert Bateman. Today, Baillie's conservation and public education legacies continue through the James L. Baillie Memorial Fund for Bird Research and Preservation (see <http://www.bsc-eoc.org/organization/jlbmf.html>), which provides funding opportunities for Canadian students interested in field studies and projects that improve our understanding and conservation of birds. In 1935, Baillie was elected a member of the American Ornithologists' Union—only the eighth Canadian to be so honored.

Above all else, however, Baillie was a dedicated museum man. He published reports of numerous museum expeditions and actively sought to enhance ROM's bird collection. In a 1970 tribute to Baillie, C. H. D. Clarke

wrote, "Jim had a rare sense of the museum collection as . . . documents that would never cease yielding new information. . . . The fact that the whole history of environmental pollution in Sweden has been read from the molecular analyses of piths from the feathers of birds in the Swedish National Museum, the dates being the dates on labels, fitted precisely Jim's concept of the specimen as a storehouse of information yet undreamed of." In fact, Baillie's dedication to the museum concept drove him to what he felt was the most rewarding accomplishment of his entire career: acquiring Great Auk (*Pinguinus impennis*) and Labrador Duck (*Camptorhynchus labradorius*) specimens for the ROM. Although he was proud that the ROM already held 108 specimens of the Passenger Pigeon (*Ectopistes migratorius*)—"the largest collection of them in existence," he wrote to a friend—he was distraught that not one Canadian museum possessed a mounted specimen of the Great Auk. The other species that had once inhabited parts of Canada—the Labrador Duck—was represented in Canadian museums by only two specimens.

As Baillie searched for possible specimens of the Great Auk and Labrador Duck, he appealed to his weekly newspaper readership and his network of patrons for funding. In 1964, his resolve and efforts were finally rewarded (see Fig. 1). The reference for the quotes that follow is Anglin, L. 1987. *Birder Extraordinaire: The life and legacy of James L. Baillie*. Toronto Ornithological Club, Toronto, Ontario. Thanks to Lise Anglin and the book's publishers—Toronto Ornithological Club and Long Point Bird Observatory—for providing quotations and permission to quote from the book.—ALEXANDER T. CRINGAN; e-mail: alexc@lamar.colostate.edu

On July 22 1964, [Baillie's] son-in-law drove [Baillie] to New York with Helen [Baillie's second wife] and Florence [his daughter] to negotiate the deal with Dr. R. S. Palmer of the American Museum of Natural History.

On July 26, [they] made the return trip to Toronto with two more inanimate passengers aboard—one Great Auk and one Labrador Duck. Jim was nervous during the drive lest an accident might result in damage to the glass case or the birds. However there was no mishap.



FIG. 1. James L. Baillie contemplating the Great Auk specimen he procured in 1964 for the Royal Ontario Museum in Toronto. This specimen is widely believed to have been the one previously owned by John James Audubon (see pages 154–160, “Audubon’s Auk, bird no. 20,” in Fuller, E. 1999. *The Great Auk*. Harry N. Abrams, Inc. Publishers, New York). Anxious to see and paint a Great Auk and other sea birds of northern latitudes, John James Audubon embarked on a voyage to Labrador in summer 1833. Poor weather, however, precluded the expedition from ever reaching locations where Audubon could observe Great Auks. Thus, he had to acquire a mounted specimen from which to make his painting for *Birds of North America*. As reported by an officer of the Toronto Ornithological Club, “It is strongly suspected that the ROM’s Great Auk was indeed Audubon’s specimen.” He went on, however, to mention at least one source that brought this belief into question: “... although everything collected was consistent with that specimen being Audubon’s (nothing glaring disproving that possibility), the chain of ownership was not complete enough to provide ‘absolute proof’ of this, but it is very likely that this indeed is the case.” According to Fuller (1999), when Audubon’s Great Auk was restored and remounted in 1921, the renovator discovered that it was stuffed with old German newspapers, thus dispelling the prevailing notion that Audubon’s auk was American in origin. Rather, the German association indicates an Icelandic origin.

Against somewhat unexpected odds, he had achieved a goal seen by many as unattainable. On 19 May 1970, just days before his death, Jim wrote from the Toronto General Hospital, “With a staff of three or four, we . . . acquired a Great Auk, a long-extinct Canadian bird previously represented in Canadian collections only by bones. The fact that the specimen turned out to be John James Audubon’s very own specimen, from which he made his famous painting, was an unexpected bonus. Happily, at the same time, from the same U.S. ladies’ college [Vassar], we acquired another Canadian we did not previously possess—a drake Labrador Duck. Previous Canadian-held Labrador ducks exist only in Dalhousie and McGill Universities. . . . The possession of these two treasures is an accepted criterion of the value of a museum’s collection, in ornithological circles. . . . Both ours are magnificent birds in first-class condition, mounted in hermetically sealed cases.”

EPILOGUE: *Pinguinus*, the Great Auk's genus name, reflects the species' widely used common name: "penguin." Although the derivation of *Pinguinus* is uncertain, possibilities include "pen-winged" or "pinioned," from the Welsh terms for white (pen) and head (gwyn), or the Latin word for fat (*penquis*). It was after Europeans discovered *Pinguinus impennis* in the northern Atlantic that explorers found members of the similar-looking—but very different—Spheniscidae family (penguins) in the Southern hemisphere (Montevicchi, W. A. and D. A. Kirk. 1996. Great Auk. Birds of North America, no. 260). Although the Great Auk inhabited much of the northern Atlantic, there is evidence that prehistoric people had extirpated the species from many parts of its original range. Climate changes also may have factored into the species' range contractions.

Human exploitation of this flightless species for its meat, eggs, oil, and down continued right up until the early 19th century, by which time the northern Atlantic "penguin" had become quite rare. Another significant blow to the population came in 1830, when an underwater volcanic eruption occurred near Iceland, causing tremors and massive waves that washed away the Island of Geirfuglas-ter—one of the species' last important breeding sites. The largest-known nesting colony of Great Auks, however, was found on Funk Island (historically known as Penguin Island), located off the coast of Newfoundland; in 1841, the last of Funk Island's auks was killed. In 1844, the species disappeared altogether when two Great Auks found on Eldey Island near Iceland were beaten to death and sold for use as stuffed specimens.—CYNTHIA P. MELCHER; e-mail: wjo@usgs.gov